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AUTHOR Burgess-Kohn, Jane
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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses primarily on the fathering role as played by the widower. Traditionally, the father plays the role of disciplinarian. The therapeutic role which involves expressing affection and giving tender care to children is assumed primarily by the mother. Men appear to be sheltered by their wives from any degree of involvement with their children. Ideally, men ought to be free, if they choose, to go beyond the limits of the traditional masculine role and become more fully involved in child rearing roles. Recent literature is suggesting that men are assuming a more expressive posture with their children. This is, in part, due to the increasing number of working mothers who are asking their husbands to become more involved with the children and, in part, due to the women's liberation movement. Recent research on widowers indicates that the existing notions about men not being capable or desirous of parenting at the expressive level is highly questionable. (Author)

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THE FATHER'S ADJUSTMENT AS A SINGLE PARENT

by

Jane Burgess-Kohn, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Sociology
University of Wisconsin-Waukesha

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THE FATHER'S ADJUSTMENT AS A SINGLE PARENT

JANE BURGESS-KOHN
University of Wisconsin - Waukesha

This paper focuses primarily on the "fathering" role as played by the widower. While there is a great deal of literature on the single parent family, (Burgess, 1969) little has been written until recently on the man's role as a single parent. The reason for this might very well be that men traditionally are assigned to the role of "breadwinner."

Traditionally, the rearing of children has been considered the province of the mother. Literature abounds with evidence that the American father is on the periphery of the family so far as parenting roles are concerned. (Burgess, 1972) As Bigner (1970) summarizes, "A man usually considers his work to be the focus of his fathering behavior. If he is a good provider, he is a good father."

According to the norms established and preserved by our society, the "natural" role of the mother is to perform role behaviors that include tasks which aid in the health and safety of children and to inculcate into their children the attitudes, values, knowledge and behavior patterns necessary to produce "appropriate" behavior patterns. The woman is socialized into her parental role as a young child, and as an adult often does not perceive her husband in the nurturance and paternal roles. There is no counter-part in terms of parental socialization for the male child.

Of course, the child socialization and child care roles have always been played to some extent by fathers, sometimes freely, sometimes with reluctance and a feeling that this is not exactly what

they ought to be doing. The therapeutic role (Nye, 1973) which involves expressing affection and giving tender, loving care to family members; helping with personal problem solving at the intellectual and emotional level has been also assumed to be primarily the province of the wife. Men, having been culturally conditioned in our society to inhibit the expression of almost all their emotions, except perhaps anger, are not expected to play the therapeutic role. Expressiveness, gentleness, responsiveness are thought to be "feminine" traits and masculinity means to be tough, unexpressive and aggressive. (Balswick, 1971) Growing up with these expectations of sex roles we find that in marriage women seem to withhold "expressive" problems from their husbands in the same manner as many men withhold "instrumental" problems from their wives. (Burgess, 1975) Men are"sheltered" from involvement with their children by their wives.

Thus, we have perpetuated the notion that men can't fill the therapeutic, child socialization, and child care roles as can women. This notion is nurtured by psychologists and psychiatrists with their constant emphasis on the mother-child relationships and lack of research on father-child relationships. Sociological studies of child development have treated the role of "father" only in terms of the consequences of father-absence to the child. Mass media, the legal system as well as social science studies in general seldom give credence to the ability of the male to play the parental role in the nurturing sense. Thus, in most, if not all areas of the social structure, the traditional "father" role is supported: i.e., being a good provider.

Ideally, men ought to be free, if they choose, to go beyond the limits of the traditional masculine role and to become fully involved in the child care and child socialization roles. They should be free to relate on an emotional basis with their children. Bringing up children with greater involvement of the father requires a change in societal views about "fathering." Men will have to be conditioned to lose their reluctance and resistance to the parental role. Male children will have to be socialized as they grow into adulthood to express their emotions, for the inexpressive father cannot relate effectively on an emotional level with children. (Burgess, 1975)

Happily, what little research there is on relationships between men and children reveals that men are beginning to turn away from the traditional father role. Fein (1974) found that men in all walks of life are becoming more involved with their children. He sees this change emanating from the increasing number of married women working outside the home who are asking their husbands to become more involved in the care of children. Second, Fein believes that the women's liberation movements have caused men as well as women to question traditional role sets, and as a consequence, men are enjoying the tender, caring role without feeling "unmanly" about their nurturing role.

We need much more research to sift out the fact from the myths regarding man's ability to play the "parenting" role. My own research on the widowed male indicates that the existing notions about men not being capable of parenthood in terms of the socialization, therapeutic and child care roles are highly questionable. My findings are from data obtained through the use of interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The non-random sample includes thirty widowers, fathers of a

total of 72 children ranging in age from three months to 21 years of age.

The Therapeutic Role of the Father

It appears that when given the opportunity, men can relate on an emotional level with children. With only a few exceptions, the widowers in my sample felt that their relationship with their children had improved and that they were closer to their children. This, of course, has depended somewhat on the ages and personalities of the children. Men with very young children did find that their relationship became more strained. A father of a three-year old son, for example, said, "It is very difficult to explain to a small child, so dependent upon his mother, what these changes are all about. Timmy is hostile to me and seems to think I am in some way responsible for his feeling of being abandoned by his mother." Those with children between the ages of eight through thirteen found their relationship became much closer than it had ever been prior to their being a single parent. Most problems appeared more resolvable when children were beyond the age of fourteen or fifteen. Generally, the widowers found their children did more openly come to them with problems they previously took to their mothers.

While general satisfaction with communication was expressed, many fathers did wish for more communication. Typically, one father said, "Communication is carried on fairly well, however, it's hard for my daughter to tell me girlish things and difficult for me to understand the female way of logic at age thirteen. This is my greatest frustration. The boys I can handle well."

All these fathers were deeply concerned with their inability to relate regarding their children's early periods of grief, (although few, if any, parents know how to help their children or themselves cope with the loss of a loved one). Many of the widowers reported being unable to initiate conversation regarding the death of their wives. Typically, a father of several teen-age children said, "They just seemed to accept death and have not grieved openly after the funeral. I wish I knew how to help them express their feelings." Another father said of his seven-year-old son, "Billy used his mother's death as some sort of a crutch -- he seems to be looking for sympathy everywhere. Yet I can't reach him." Others said, "We simply share our grief, we cry together and we will work through our problems together."

Children suffer the same anguish as do adults when a loved one dies. It is necessary to help children grasp reality and to find ways to express their emotions in order to cope with grief. This is a large order for any adult. It seems highly likely that fathers who have been conditioned to effectively play the "therapeutic" role in the family are better able to help their children cope with grief and to adjusting to life as a single-parent family.

The Socialization Role

Most of the fathers felt their children became more independent and the older children became more supportive of their fathers following the death of their mothers. Typically, the men said, "My children have taken more responsibility for making decisions that concern themselves, seem more reliable in carrying out my wishes and are assuming more responsibility generally for our every-day-living together."

These widowed fathers, with few exceptions, reported that discipline did not become more of a problem. The children seemed to sense the importance of cooperation. As one father remarked, "We all have to rely on one another now." With no exceptions, fathers reported their children helped more around the house now that their mother was dead. They said, "Our children are contributing more to the physical maintenance. They try to clean their own bathroom, vacuum and dust, and are trying to learn to cook and shop." Another said, "They are great. We split up our chores." A father of a seventeen-year-old daughter said, "She is really something special; from a little scatterbrain, she is now assuming most of the responsibility of keeping the household together."

Little change in school performance of the children was noted except for the better. Many fathers reported becoming more involved in school activities such as attending P.T.A. meetings and consulting with teachers.

In sum, the widowers expressed great satisfaction with how well their children were becoming socialized into their new life-style. They enjoyed taking over the tasks involved in looking after the well-being of their children and were proud of their children's behavior.

The Child Care Role

Widowers with older children reported a minimal of problems with child care. Generally, where there was an age spread, child-care chores were temporarily distributed among the older children until other arrangements could be made. School-age children were cared for often with the help of an adult to keep them after school until the father came home from work.

Men left with very young children to care for face a real dilemma -- a crisis situation in most cases. One young father said, "When my wife died, my children were fourteen months, three,and eleven years of age. The problem of finding babysitters and someone to watch the children was like a nightmare. This has been a do-it-yourself project since my wife's death, but I am managing." Most of the fathers of young children felt they were able to cope with child-care, some with assistance from grandparents, other relatives and friends, others through their own ingenuity and willingness to be the parent. As one father said, "We can't be both father and mother, and we shouldn't even try. But let's be a real father -- not the stereotype of a man's role which casts him as provider, disciplinarian and something of a bumbling, clumsy clod when it comes to caring for children. As a husband, we were previously excluded from most areas of our children's daily life. Now we can be fully involved. We can fulfill our children's physical needs as well as supply the love, understanding and comfort they need. No longer can we take the children out for a ride, give them sweets and return them to their mothers to clean up, serene in the knowledge that we were good providers."

Conclusions

The ongoing research, I am sure, will support the premise that men are as capable to play the "parenting" role in its fullest sense as are women. Their so-called inability or reluctance to play the tender, caring role seems to be rooted primarily in social structure. As men and women truly value an involved father-child relationship at the emotional and intellectual levels, "father" will become more

than "provider" in the norms of our society. A sample of 30 is too small for generalizations, but "my widowers" have discovered the joy of parenting and do not feel unmanly!

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